

## **A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON DEPRESSION EXPERIENCED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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### *ABSTRACT*

Since the Movement Control Order (MCO) came into force on 18 March 2020, Teaching and Learning from Home have been implemented to provide continuous education to students without the risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus. After two years have passed, students are advised to return to campus. They have begun studying face-to-face or in a hybrid manner. One of the difficulties faced is identifying the level of depression experienced by students in the transition environment from Teaching and Learning from Home to face-to-face or hybrid learning. Therefore, this study tries to identify the level of depression among the Third Semester Diploma in Management and Office Technology students from the Faculty of Business and Management at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Pahang Branch, Jengka Campus. The Beck Depression Inventory (Second Edition) was distributed to 110 students in four different classes from the same faculty. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. The Cross Tabulation analysis results showed that almost half of the students suffered from a depressive disorder. The findings of this study have very important implications.

*Keywords:* students; level of depression; teaching and learning from home

### **1. Introduction**

The word 'depression' refers to the feeling of sadness experienced by an individual (Wicks Nelson & Israel, 2013). According to Gurian (2011), every individual experiences sad and gloomy feelings at certain times in their life. For some individuals, this emotional disturbance only occurs for a brief period. However, Ingersoll (2019) states that this feeling of sadness and gloom can continue to lead to unwanted consequences such as suicide or more serious mental illness.

Depression can affect many aspects of an individual's life whether in thinking, emotions, physical or social. In this study, depression is studied from the aspect of a clinical mood disorder. According to Harper et al. (2020), clinical depression is a type of mental illness that is categorized as feeling extremely sad. It will cause a person to feel prolonged sadness, fatigue, lack of energy, irritability, and loss of interest in daily activities. This depression usually lasts for at least two weeks and if treated, the patient will recover. However, if it lasts for months or years without treatment, then it will have a negative impact such as suicide or mental illness. Among the causes of depression are deterioration of physical health, social problems, financial problems or taking certain medications. Depression can happen to anyone either consciously or unconsciously.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various sectors including the education sector. According to the UNESCO Monitoring Report (2021), 192 countries have suspended school and university sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the Movement Control Order (MCO) was enforced, the education system in Malaysia has also shifted from traditional classes to

teaching and learning from home. The transition to this new education system exceeded expectations because it required the involvement and support of various parties, especially lecturers and students. There are various challenges faced by various parties during this teaching and learning from home. Kauffman's (2011) study shows that depression among students has been a controversial issue for the past few decades.

After two years have passed, university students are advised to return to campus. They have begun studying face-to-face or in a hybrid manner. So, one of the difficulties faced is identifying the students' level of depression in this transition learning environment, i.e., from Teaching and Learning from Home to face-to-face or hybrid learning. The problem is that they 'grew up learning from home, i.e., from high school to the university level. Some of them will experience emotional disturbances. They easily feel sad, and disappointed and may take inappropriate actions. What about their emotions? To what extent is the level of depression experienced by them? Thus, the objective of this study is to identify the level of depression experienced by both male and female students during the process of learning transition. Hence, this article starts by discussing past studies on depression among students, followed by the research methodology, results in analysis and discussion, and conclusions. It is hoped that this study can be used as a guide to various parties regarding the students' depression level, which is indeed unavoidable, apart from giving appropriate suggestions so that the students' emotions can be controlled.

## **2. Literature Review**

Although there is a depression study done on university students, it is not given much attention. This may be due to society's perception that these students are adults and good at taking care of themselves. The fact is, they are still human and have souls and feelings that need to be taken care of. They not only experience family problems, financial problems, and social problems but also struggle in academics. According to Ng (2020), since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of depression among university students has increased to the point that some have committed suicide.

Nunley's study (2013) also states that many studies done in the 1960s and 1970s have proven that depression that exists among children and teenagers is more serious than expected. This is supported by a study done by Petersen et al. (2013) who found that 7% to 33% of students suffer from depression. Turkington & Kaplan (2017) also found that when a teenager reaches the age of 15, one in five of them will experience depression. This clearly shows that depression among students is indeed a problem that should not be taken lightly.

Since the 1970s, depression among students has been known as masked depression. This concept explains that usually students are not aware of the occurrence of depression among them. This type of depression is usually covered by behaviours such as hyperactivity, learning disabilities, skipping school (Kauffman, 2011), fatigue, problems concentrating, health problems and body health (Dacey & Kenny, 2007). According to Turkington & Kaplan (2017), this condition makes it difficult to distinguish between masked depression and emotional disturbances among students. They also stated that depression among students goes undiagnosed and untreated because its symptoms are often equated with other behavioural problems. So, it can be said that studying depressive disorders among students is something difficult but important. Even Bachanas & Kaslow (2021) in their study stated that depression among students needs good attention and intervention. According to them, students' thinking is unstable. They are not mature enough to solve a problem. If there is any problem, they prefer to hide it because they feel

insecure. Over time, they fail to control their emotions. So, adults need to be sensitive in using appropriate words or manners to help these students.

Irshad et al. (2017) stated that most university students experience pressure in terms of workload, family, friends and lecturers to maintain good work results and complete assignments on time without fail. According to Thawabieh & Qaisy (2019), this confirms that university life is stressful in students' lives. Ramachandiran & Dhanapal (2018) stated that students who experience depression are caused by family problems, scholarship requirements, financial burden, competition in class, exams, time management, and course-related stress. Hanna et al. (2018) stated that career choices and job opportunities lead to depression among students. This is supported by Yikealo et al. (2018) stating that students usually experience depression due to the need to ensure academic continuity and preparation to further their careers.

Next, Al-Dubai et al. (2017) found that depression has a significant relationship with worries about the future, financial problems, interpersonal conflicts, family problems, low self-esteem, roommate conflicts, inability to get parental support to solve problems, and changes in eating habits. Khan et al. (2017) stated that students experience depression due to lifestyle changes, interpersonal relationships and academic pressures such as exams, homework and additional requirements that may exceed their abilities. Lin and Huang (2017) also stated that depression factors such as loneliness and burnout are common problems among students and it is something they may face while at university. According to Stoliker & Lafreniere (2019), a lonely state will create a negative, isolated and worthless feeling that occurs due to several factors including a lack of satisfaction in social relationships, expectations that do not meet the real social status or a deficit in emotional connectivity.

Students in Malaysia are always faced with anxiety and stress. This situation occurs continuously in different ways at certain times throughout their study process. These students will never feel at ease because of the constant tasks they have to do. According to Mazni et al. (2014), anxiety and stress, if left unchecked, can affect the students' level of depression. A study conducted by the Malaysian Ministry of Health (2020) shows that the level of education is one of the determining factors in influencing the students' level of depression. The study found that students between the ages of 16 and 24 have a higher tendency to commit suicide. Sleeping disorders and anxiety are among the factors that affect their level of depression. This study is closely related to university students because they are classified under the same age level and are likely to face the same risk if the process of university life is too stressful for them.

In addition, Khan et al. (2017) found that the main factors of depression among students are family pressure, emotional pressure, financial pressure and social pressure. Family pressure occurs when most students want to live independently and do not want to follow the strict rules controlled by their parents. This is also stated by Bhat et al. (2018), i.e., students who live with family have a high psychological depression score compared to students who do not live with family. Emotional pressure occurs when most students are always looking for the most suitable partner to understand themselves. Every student wants to experience a positive, healthy, and fulfilling life with their partner and finding a good and compatible partner can be stressful. Financial stress occurs when students want to have a rich life in the future. This causes them to experience pressure to realize it. Social pressure occurs when most students need approval and admiration from the people around them. They live in a state of stress because they have to keep moving forward and it causes the existence of social pressure.

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted using a quantitative research approach. The study population consisted of 110 male and female students of the Third Semester Diploma in Management and Office Technology from the Faculty of Business and Management at UiTM Pahang Branch, Jengka Campus. A stratified random sampling method was used to collect samples from the study population. These students were chosen because they started their studies on Teaching and Learning from Home for two consecutive semesters, i.e., from Semester One until Semester Two, immediately after the completion of *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. (SPM)*. They are required to return to campus in the third semester of study and continue face-to-face or hybrid learning.

The research instrument was a questionnaire distributed to each study population through Google Forms. This study used the Beck Depression Inventory (Second Edition) measuring tool (Beck Depression Inventory-II, 1996). This was a self-report inventory. It consisted of 21 items to assess the level of depression among normal people as well as clinical patients aged between 13 and 80 years. There were four statements for each item arranged according to the level of depression seriousness. For example, the first item represented the symptom of feeling sad, so the choice level was 0 (I do not feel sad), 1 (I feel sad most of the time), 2 (I feel sad all the time) or 3 (I am so sad that I cannot take it anymore). The statement of each of these items is scored in ascending order, namely, 0, 1, 2 and 3. The total maximum score was 63 and the total minimum score was 0. The total score obtained was categorized into six levels of depression, namely, Level One (normal; score 0 – 10), Level Two (mild mood disturbance; scores 11 – 16), Level Three (borderline clinical depression; scores 17 – 20), Level Four (mild clinical depression; scores 21 – 30), Level Five (serious clinical depression; scores 31 – 40) and Level Six (very serious clinical depression; scores 41 – 63). Therefore, in this study, if the score exceeded the cut-off point (mean), i.e., the score was above 17, then it was found that the students experienced a clinical mood disorder.

The research data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Statistical analysis in the form of descriptive and inferential statistics such as Cross Tabulation was used to analyze the data quantitatively. The analysis of the results was discussed based on the respondents' demographics, the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test, the total score obtained and finally, the findings also showed the levels of student depression according to gender.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Respondent demographics

Out of 110 questionnaires distributed, only 104 (94.55%) students answered. According to a study by Krejcie & Morgan (1970), a sample number of 80 people is sufficient in a population of approximately 100 people. However, only 97 (93.27%) questionnaire forms can be used for further analysis because the remaining 7 (6.73%) forms are not complete.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the respondents. The number of male and female students was more or less the same, namely 49 (50.52%) and 48 (49.48%) respectively. Most of them (96.91%) were between 20 and 22 years old. A total of 47 students (48.45%) obtained a Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) between 3.01 to 3.49.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

	Items	Respondents (Frequency)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	48	49.48
	Female	49	50.52
Age	20 to 22 years	94	96.91
	More than 22 years	3	3.09
Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA)	2.00 to 2.49	23	23.71
	2.50 to 3.00	17	17.53
	3.01 to 3.49	47	48.45
	3.50 and above	7	7.22
	Others	3	3.09

#### **4.2 Reliability test**

The consistency of the interval items in the questionnaire for this study was tested using Cronbach's Alpha analysis. According to Hair et al. (2007), each item is reliable if Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value is greater than 0.60. Table 2 shows that Cronbach's Alpha coefficient obtained for the 21 items was 0.853. Therefore, these items are reliable for further analysis.

Table 2: The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient

	Items	Coefficient Value
The Beck Depression Inventory-II	21	0.853

#### **4.3 The total score of students according to the level of depression**

Table 3 shows the total scores of students by gender for each level of depression. Overall, the total score of the students was 1,678.1 marks. Of this amount, the score of female students is 845 marks, while the score of male students was 833.1 marks. The cut-off point (mean) was 17.30, which was above 17. This finding supports the Beck Depression Inventory-II (1996) that if the score exceeded the cut-off point (mean), i.e., the score was above 17, the students experienced a clinical mood disorder.

Table 3: Total score of students according to the level of depression

Level of Depression	Female		Male	
	Respondent (Frequency)	Score (marks)	Respondent (Frequency)	Score (marks)
One (score 0 – 10)	12	212	13	209
Two (scores 11 – 16)	13	422.5	14	416.55
Three (scores 17 – 20)	7	53	5	52
Four (scores 21 – 30)	10	106	10	104
Five (scores 31 – 40)	5	44.5	4	45
Six (scores 41 – 63)	2	7	2	6.55
Total	49	845	48	833.1
Total Score				1,678.1
Cut-off Point (mean)				17.3

#### 4.4 Levels of students' depression

Table 4 shows the Cross Tabulation analysis of the students' depression levels according to gender. The result shows that a total of 13 (26.53%) female students were at Level Two, which is a mild emotional disturbance. A total of 12 (24.49%) students were at a normal state (Level One) and 10 (20.41%) students were at Level Four, which is moderate clinical depression. This situation is worrying because if seen from the cut-off point (mean), at a score above 17, that is by adding up the number of students from Level Three to Level Six, it was found that a total of 24 (48.98%) female students experienced clinical depression.

The study also found that most male students, namely, 14 (29.17%) of them experienced a mild emotional disturbance (Level Two). While a total of 13 (27.08%) students were at a normal state (Level One) and 10 (20.83%) students were at Level Four, which is moderate clinical depression. Just like female students, this situation is worrying because if seen in terms of the cut-off point, at a score above 17, a total of 21 (43.75%) male students also experienced clinical depression.

Table 4: Cross Tabulation analysis of students' depression level

Level of Depression	Sex		Total	
	Female	Male	Respondents (Frequency)	Percentage (%)
	Respondents (Frequency)	Respondents (Frequency)	Respondents (Frequency)	Percentage (%)
One (score 0 – 10)	12	13	25	25.77
Two (scores 11 – 16)	13	14	27	27.84
Three (scores 17 – 20)	7	5	12	12.37
Four (scores 21 – 30)	10	10	20	20.62
Five (scores 31 – 40)	5	4	9	9.28
Six (scores 41 – 63)	2	2	4	4.12
Total	49	48	97	100

Overall, the findings in Table 4 show that 27 (27.84%) of the female and male students are at Level Two. They experienced a mild emotional disturbance. A total of 25 (25.77%) students are at Level One. These students are in a normal state, without emotional disturbances. Further, 20 (20.62%) of them are at Level Four, which means they experienced moderate clinical depression. However, if seen from the cut-off point, which is at a score above 17, by adding up the number of students from Level Three to Level Six, it was found that a total of 45 (46.39%) experienced clinical depression. This result shows a worrying situation because almost half of the students regardless of female or male showed symptoms of depressive disorder.

## **5. Discussion**

In terms of the respondent's background, it was found that the number of female and male students are likely the same, 52.38% and 47.62% respectively. 95.24% of them are between 20 and 22 years old. The majority of the students (52.38%) obtained a CGPA between 3.01 to 3.49.

Next, the value of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient obtained for the 21 items is 0.853. This coefficient value supports the study done by Hair et al. (2007) who stated that the items are valid for further analysis if the value of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is more than 0.60.

However, compared to several previous studies that used the same inventory, it was found that there was a significant difference in terms of the mean score. The mean score obtained in this study (17.3) is higher compared to the mean score of 10.3 by Baron & Perron (2020), 8.3 by Kaplan et al. (2016), and 6.23 by Connelly & Johnston (2013).

This study also shows that 46.39% of students are experiencing clinical depression. A total of 12.37% of students are at a mild level of depression (Level Three), 20.62% at a moderate level of depression (Level Four), 9.28% at a serious level of depression (Level Five) and 4.12% at a very serious level (Level Six). Using the same measurement tool, but at a different cut-off point (mean) difference, the number of students with clinical depressive disorder in this study is greater compared to other studies. For example, the study by Kaplan et al. (2016) showed that as much as 6% of students experienced clinical depression with a cut-off point (mean) above a score of 16, Connelly & Johnston (2013) found that 9.75% of students were at a moderate and serious depression level with a cut-off point (mean) above the score 20, and Marcotte, Alain & Gosselin (2015) recorded 16.7% of students experienced clinical depression with a cut-off point (mean) above the score of 16.

Overall, the results of this study recorded a high mean score and a high percentage level of students' depression, namely 17.3 and 46.39%. This finding supported the study done by Albert & Beck (2015), which shows a high percentage rate as 33 % of students are at moderate and serious levels of depression. This may be because the study was conducted three weeks before the final exam was held. Therefore, it can be said that the pressure of completing assignments, in addition to preparing for the final exams, may have an impact on these students. Few students are quarantined in the residential college because they have close contact with COVID-19 patients.

## **6. Conclusions**

In conclusion, this study recorded a total of 46.39% of the total sample size of 97 students who experienced clinical depression with an overall mean score of 17.3. This finding shows a worrying situation because the depressive disorder may be a hidden problem among the students. Although this finding may be influenced by the pressure of completing assignments or preparing

for the final exams and cannot give a true picture of the students' depression level, this finding is useful to know the risk of depression development among students who face various inevitable life pressures. Future studies are more focused on examining the relationship between factors such as gender, academic achievement or family background in influencing the students' level of depression.

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